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MEETING AT THE STATE DEPARTMENT

September 10, 1963, 5:45 PM -- Subject: Vietnam

Present: Secretary McNamara, Attorney General, Director McCone, Under Secretary Harriman, Director Bell, Director Murrow, General Taylor, General Krulak, Deputy Secretary Gilpatric, Assistant Secretary Hilsman, Mr. Colby, Mr. Phillips (AID), Mr. Janow (AID), Mr. Bundy, Mr. Sorensen, Mr. Forrestal, Mr. Bromley Smith

Mr. Bundy opened the meeting by making the following points:

1. He requested that each agency list all current programs being carried out in Vietnam.
2. He suggested the drafting in Washington of a guidance document to be sent to all U.S. agency officials which would define the posture and attitude to be followed by all U.S. government officials in Vietnam.
3. He suggested that we need a document to provide press guidance for use in Washington and in Vietnam.
4. He recommended that we develop a way of controlling all U.S. messages going to Vietnam.

Mr. Bundy pointed out that the U.S. policy is as the President has stated in his last two public statements, copies attached.

The Attorney General stated his view that we should now concentrate on specifics. All agreed that the war would go better without Nhu and Diem. How much do we pay for a change? He said that he did not think we should discuss with the President generalities and differences of view. What we should now do is to concern ourselves with specific actions.

Secretary McNamara thought we ought to try to change Diem's policies. He believed our present policy was not viable. He thought that we had been trying to overthrow Diem, but we had no alternative to Diem that he knew about. Therefore, we were making it impossible to continue to work with Diem on the one hand and, on the other, not developing an alternative solution. He felt that we should go back to what we were doing three weeks ago.

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Under Secretary Harriman stated his flat disagreement. He said Diem had created a situation where we cannot back him.

Mr. Murrow said that the military views as represented by Secretary McNamara, General Taylor and General Krulak were saying that our sole objective was to win the war and that we could win with Diem. The civilian side believed that the political situation was deteriorating so rapidly in Vietnam that we must replace Diem before his eroding position led to a collapse of the fight against the Viet Cong.

During a discussion of how we should use Congressional criticism of Vietnam to advance our objectives, Mr. Hilsman said Senator Church would be fully responsive to suggestions as to the wording of the Senate resolution and to the timing of its introduction. Mr. Bell pointed out that we might well use Congressional criticism of Diem in an effort to persuade Diem to change his ways, but that such criticism would be reflected in the debate on the aid program, which would be hard to control.

Mr. McCone expressed his doubt that alternative leadership existed in Vietnam. He said he had heard various names but he knew of no paper which listed a group which could form a government strong enough to rule if Diem and Nhu were removed.

Mr. Hilsman described a two-prong pressure program on Diem with the aim of forcing him to change his present policies. He acknowledged that if we started down this path we would have to be prepared to contemplate the use of U.S. forces on the ground in Vietnam.

General Taylor indicated his support of the position that we should continue to work on Diem and revealed a reluctance to contemplate the use of U.S. troops in combat in Vietnam, either against the Diem government or against the Viet Cong.

Mr. Bundy asked that two papers be prepared by Mr. Hilsman, the first listing our objectives in Vietnam and the second a program of pressures against Diem with the aim of forcing him to meet our demands. Mr. McCone was asked to prepare a paper on alternative leadership. Mr. Forrestal was asked to develop a paper recommending a delay in any decision for a sufficient time for the situation to ripen.

Mr. Harriman reminded the group that the policy of the U.S. was as stated by the President and that he agreed with it fully. He did not believe we should discuss changing that policy.

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Secretary McNamara and Mr. Bundy disagreed and felt that the group had an obligation to the President to review the policy in the light of the developing situation. Mr. Harriman and Secretary McNamara disagreed as to whether we could or could not achieve our objectives in Vietnam with Diem in control.

Mr. Murrow asked that he be relieved of writing press guidance until after tomorrow's meeting in view of the fact that the guidance could not be written until our policy was clear.

Bromley Smith

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